

To: Interested parties

Re: Convention timing

Date: January 11, 2013

Presidential campaigns have three key “moments” in the summer and fall of the election year: the VP announcement, the convention, and the debates. The convention offers campaigns their longest and most tightly controlled earned media opportunity.

The Republicans are considering two time slots: the last week of June or the third week of July. The DNC is considering the last week of July or the last week of August. In other words, the two party conventions could be or contiguous, or five-to-eight weeks apart.

This memo explores the advantages and disadvantages of each date.

What the data say

As you can see in the attached chart, convention viewership has dropped significantly for both parties over the last three decades, however the timing of either party’s convention date does not appear to impact ratings in any significant way. While ratings generally rise after September 1, convention viewership does not appear to be correlated with when the convention occurred (early vs late, close together, etc.). Since 1988, there has been rough equivalency between Republican and Democratic convention viewership, regardless of when the convention took place, with the exception of 2012 when Democrats enjoyed a modest advantage over Republicans.

Overall, ratings in July and August are almost identical.

Strategic considerations

The argument for July:

- Having the convention in July will give the campaign an extra four weeks to spend general election money. It’s likely the campaign will have to spend significant resources in the spring and early summer responding to GOP superpacs and/or trying to define the GOP nominee. This could create a severe cash crunch in August if the campaign can’t spend general election money.

- If the GOP has a protracted primary, voter attention could remain focused on GOP candidates from the spring through their convention at the end of June. A July convention would ensure you can re-focus voters on your frame before the end of the summer.
- The convention has great potential to boost organizing efforts in the host state, although the 2008 Colorado staff and 2012 North Carolina staff regarded the convention as a mixed bag. While it helped generate excitement, it diverted a large number of volunteer hours away from voter contact. Having the convention in July will allow the field staff to leverage the event for volunteer sign ups, but shouldn't interrupt voter contact in late August/early September.

Make your case as late as possible

- Any bounce the Republican nominee gets from a June or July convention will decay by August. Paid media can carry the water for you in the meantime and you can use the VP announcement to capture attention in July.
- Waiting until the end of August gives you the benefit of kicking off the post-Labor Day campaign swing with extra momentum and enthusiasm. Closer proximity to early voting and vote-by-mail will boost turnout efforts.
- There's no question that primary money will get tight if you wait until August, but the campaign can employ a number of strategies to conserve primary money. Worse case, a bridge loan taken out in the primary could be paid with general election money after the convention.

Recommendation: July

This is a close call, but we recommend July for two reasons: (1) the financial landscape is highly unpredictable and, while primary money will always be scarce, a July date is far less risky than August. (2) There's potentially a big upside to waiting until the end of August to make your case to voters, but there's also some risk of never getting out from under the GOP candidate, especially if you are outspent on TV.